

EXCLUSIVE

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EXCLUSIVE

ROUND 'EM UP

Exclusive: Russians Appear to Use Facebook to Push Trump Rallies in 17 U.S. Cities

'Being Patriotic,' a Facebook group uncovered by The Daily Beast, is the first evidence of suspected Russian provocateurs explicitly mobilizing Trump supporters in real life.

BEN COLLINS, GIDEON RESNICK, KEVIN POULSEN, SPENCER ACKERMAN 09.20.17 11:39 AM ET



Suspected Russia propagandists on [Facebook](#) tried to organize more than a dozen pro-Trump rallies in Florida during last year's election, The Daily Beast has learned.

Russian provocateurs successfully mobilizing Americans over Facebook in direct support of Donald Trump.

The Aug. 20, 2016, events were collectively called “Florida Goes Trump!” and they were billed as a “patriotic state-wide flash mob,” unfolding simultaneously in 17 different cities and towns in the battleground state. It’s difficult to determine how many of those locations actually witnessed any turnout, in part because Facebook’s recent deletion of hundreds of Russian accounts hid much of the evidence. But videos and photos from two of the locations—Fort Lauderdale and Coral Springs—were reposted to a Facebook page run by the local Trump campaign chair, where they remain to this day.

“On August 20, we want to gather patriots on the streets of Floridian towns and cities and march to unite America and support Donald Trump!” read the Facebook event page for the demonstrations. “Our flash mob will occur in several places at the same time; more details about locations will be added later. Go Donald!”

The Florida flash mob was one of at least four pro-Trump or anti-Hillary Clinton demonstrations conceived and organized over a Facebook page called “Being Patriotic,” and a related Twitter account called “march_for_trump.” (The Daily Beast identified the accounts in a software-assisted review of politically themed social-media profiles.)

Being Patriotic had 200,000 followers and the strongest activist bent of any of the suspected Russian Facebook election pages that have so far emerged. Events promoted by the page last year included a July “Down With Hillary!” protest outside Clinton’s New York campaign headquarters, a September 11 pro-Trump demonstration in Manhattan, simultaneous “Miners for Trump” demonstrations in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh in October, and a pro-Trump rally outside Trump Tower last November, after his election victory.

**AUG
20****Florida Goes Trump! patriotic state-wide
flash mob**Public · Hosted by [Being Patriotic](#)

★ Interested

✓ Going

...

Saturday, August 20, 2016 at 2:00 PM EDT
More than a year ago

Florida

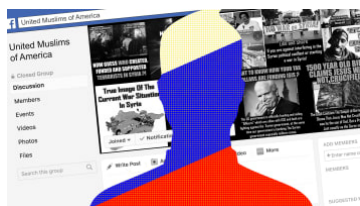
[Show Map](#)**About**[Discussion](#)**339 Went · 1.6K Interested**

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The Being Patriotic Facebook page was closed in August 2017—right when Facebook purged accounts secretly operated by a notorious St. Petersburg troll factory called Internet Research Agency. According to a [public report by U.S. intelligence agencies \(PDF\)](#), Internet Research

same style as those found on the Heart of Texas and Secured Borders Facebook pages previously identified as Russian operations.

The Being Patriotic Twitter account was suspended at around the same time.

A Facebook spokesman told The Daily Beast the company was “not able to confirm any of the details here,” in response to a question about the Russian origin of Being Patriotic, but did not challenge The Daily Beast’s reporting.

On Sept. 6, Facebook acknowledged for the first time that inauthentic accounts from 2015 to 2017 promoted what the company’s chief security officer, Alex Stamos, characterized as “divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum.” But Stamos said that most of the fraudulent activity it found—some 3,000 ads connected to 470 now-shuttered accounts linked to Russian troll farms—“didn’t specifically reference the U.S. presidential election, voting, or a particular candidate.”

After The Daily Beast found known Russian accounts that used Facebook’s Events tool to promote rallies inside the United States, the company said that it was not well positioned to determine “if something like coordination occurred” between the Trump campaign and Russia—something investigators and security researchers doubt because of the social network’s massive trove of information on its customers.

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But the discovery of the Being Patriotic rallies suggests that the fraudulent activity on Facebook did indeed involve messaging on behalf of Trump, did prompt at least some Americans to rally on Trump’s behalf, and did result in the Trump campaign volunteers subsequently sharing material from those events.

The pro-Trump events represent “the next level” of suspected Russian influence operations, said Clint Watts, a former FBI agent who has testified about those operations to a Senate committee investigating them.

way around a candidate. Again, if it traces back to Russia, you can't deny that's foreign influence in an election."

Railing Against #BLM, Too

The extent of Being Patriotic's impact is not clear. In June of last year, for example, the Being Patriotic Facebook page asked participants to "gather in front of Trump Tower, N.Y." The event received call-outs on Facebook and Twitter, and 138 people marked themselves as "attending" on Facebook. Over 400 marked themselves as interested.

March_For_Trump specifically reached out to Nick Toma, a local news anchor in Scranton, Pennsylvania, for coverage of a "Miners for Trump" rally it promoted last October, only a month before the election.

"@NickTomaWBRE Hi, Nick! We're holding a 'Miners for Trump' rally tomorrow. If you're interested in covering it, please let us know," March_for_Trump wrote on October 1st.

When Toma was emailed the link to the tweet, he told The Daily Beast: "Don't recall ever seeing it before."

Facebook has turned over some of the illicit ads to special prosecutor Robert Mueller after a federal judge issued [a search warrant](#) for the material, according to CNN. Facebook also showed congressional investigators that material but did not leave it with them. Legislators investigating Russian involvement in the 2016 election have expressed frustration over what they describe as insufficient disclosures to Congress, and have indicated that they will seek public testimony from Facebook and other social-media companies.

Watts, the former FBI agent and a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, noted that "plausible deniability is built into any Russian active-measures strategy," such as using troll farms in St. Petersburg or Macedonia to conceal influence campaigns. But compelling unsuspecting Americans to gather in the streets on behalf of Trump shows the reach and efficacy of those efforts.

The page earned such a large following, a known Macedonian fake news distributor, Nikola Tanevski, purchased [BeingPatriotic.com](#) this year, but the page is currently dormant.

The layers of deception went beyond Facebook posts and manufactured rallies. When it wasn't organizing events, Being Patriotic encouraged violence against minorities in incendiary posts. "Arrest and shoot every sh*thead taking part in burning our flag! #BLM vs #USA," Being Patriotic's Twitter account posted in April 2016, using the hashtag for the Black Lives Matter protest movement.

The account also advertised a toll-free "Being Patriotic Hotline" to report instances of voter fraud on Election Day.

"Detected a voter fraud? Tell us about it! Call 888-486-8102 or take photo/video and send it to us," the account wrote on Nov. 8. Being Patriotic's sister account, @March_for_Trump, plugged the same phone number, as well as a hotline for the "Trump Lawyer Team." The number is now disconnected.

'Broward's Most Famous Trump Fan'

When asked for comment, the White House referred The Daily Beast to the Trump campaign, which, in turn, did not respond to emailed questions. But Susie Wiles, who served as Trump's campaign manager in Florida, told The Daily Beast that the Broward County portion of the flash mob "was not an official campaign event."

That's despite the fact that the event was promoted on "Official Donald J. Trump for President Campaign Facebook Page for Broward County, Florida." Photos and videos of the demonstration were posted there afterward.

When emailed the link to the Facebook posting, Wiles told The Daily Beast: "There are groups such as this across the state—and maybe other places, too. Groups of people get together and establish a presence such as this but it is unaffiliated with the campaign, per se. The photos ring no bells with me."

Wiles also said that the Trump campaign's purported Broward County Facebook page, which markets itself as being "official," was not set up by the campaign.

"The Donald Trump campaign did not set these Facebook pages up," she told The Daily Beast. "Rather, supporters (like the lady registered as the contact) set them up to support the

The “lady” registered as the contact is Dolly Trevino Rump, the Trump campaign’s chairwoman for Broward County who, until this April, was also the secretary of the local Republican Party. The *Miami Herald* described her as “perhaps Broward’s most famous Donald Trump fan.” Rump did not immediately respond to a request for comment from The Daily Beast. Neither did the chairman of the Broward County Republican Party.



The Being Patriotic event listings for its Florida flashmobs included the names and phone numbers of people listed as local volunteer coordinators. When contacted by The Daily Beast, two of those coordinators vaguely recalled the events taking place, but not much else.

Betty Triguera, who was listed as a coordinator for a gathering in Sarasota, Florida, told The Daily Beast that she recalled but didn’t attend the event.

“We got the information from it on Twitter but I didn’t go,” Triguera said unable to remember other details.

Jim Frische, who was listed as a coordinator for an event in Clearwater, Florida, told The Daily Beast that he was called about organizing an event and put one together.



“I don’t recall the group’s name,” Frische said. “I know somebody called and said would you organize something so I put together a group. “I remember doing it and I think we had a dozen or so people out on the street corner. I remember afterward hearing it had happened all over the state.”

—with additional reporting by Sam Stein

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